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ABSTRACT

School boards, administrators, and representatives of the community should develop long-range plans that not only consider the present state of schools but attempt to project 10 years hence. Demographic changes in communities indicate that managing decline will require a willingness to pare expenditures and an attempt to win back citizens' confidence in public education. Among the approaches to managing decline are improved coordination between school districts for contract negotiations and labor relations generally, and for the legislative process. Coordination of programs and services and a common calendar for all schools reduces costs. Other budget measures include flexible staffing patterns that reduce salary costs, and fees for noninstructional programs. In view of an enrollment increase predicted by the end of the decade, contemplated school closings should be reconsidered. However, if school closing is necessary, school districts should allow sufficient lead time, establish objective reasons for the closings, and prioritize closings and relate them to long-range plans. Finally, there is a critical need for two-way open communication involving the public and the schools. (MLF)

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MANAGING DECLINE

AND

STAFFING STANDARDS FOR QUALITY

MATTHEW W. COSTANZO

Paper presented at a meeting of the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association, October 1982.

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INTRODUCTION

FROM THE SMALLEST HAMLET TO THE LARGEST COMMUNITY IN OUR STATE, BOARDED-UP SCHOOL BUILDINGS--OFTEN DECORATED WITH "FOR SALE" SIGNS--SERVE AS SILENT MONUMENTS TO THE ONCE THRIVING, ROBUST AND DYNAMIC INDUSTRY WE CALL PUBLIC EDUCATION. FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE INVOLVED IN THE EDUCATION OF OUR YOUTH, EVER-DECLINING ENROLLMENTS AND EMPTY SCHOOL BUILDINGS PROVIDE TANGIBLE EVIDENCE THAT WE ARE NOW CAPTAINS OF AN INDUSTRY IN THE STATE OF DECLINE AND RETRENCHMENT. AND WE HAVE ALREADY LEARNED THAT MANAGING DECLINE IS A MUCH MORE DIFFICULT CHALLENGE THAN MANAGING GROWTH!

AS THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION OF THE SIXTIES ENFOLDED, LITTLE DID WE REALIZE THAT THE NEW ROLES ASSIGNED TO MEN--AS WELL AS WOMEN--WOULD RESULT IN SUCH DRAMATIC CHANGES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, CONTRACEPTION, ABORTION AND FAMILY SIZE AS WELL AS ENROLLMENT TRENDS. THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION OF THE SIXTIES TRANSFORMED THE BABY BOOM OF THE FIFTIES INTO THE BABY BUST OF THE SEVENTIES.

BUT EVEN THOUGH MANY IN TODAY'S GENERATION OF YOUNG ADULTS WOULD RATHER MINGLE AS SINGLES RATHER THAN MARRY; EVEN THOUGH MANY FEMALES ARE MORE CAREER-MINDED THAN FAMILY-MINDED--THE SHEER NUMBER OF WOMEN OF CHILD-REARING AGE ALMOST GUARANTEES AN INCREASE IN BIRTHS NOW AND MORE SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN ANOTHER FOUR OR FIVE YEARS. YES, WE CAN EXPECT THE BABY BOOM CHILDREN OF THE FIFTIES TO MAKE A SECOND RUN AT OUR SCHOOLS IN THE EIGHTIES--THIS TIME AS PARENTS.

BY THE END OF THIS DECADE, WE MAY YET EXPERIENCE A BABY BOOMLET IN OUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS. OUR PARENTS OF THE FUTURE MAY NOT PRODUCE THE HUGE STUDENT POPULATIONS OF THE FIFTIES BUT AN INCREASE IN ENROLLMENT CAN BE PREDICTED ALMOST EVERYWHERE.

HOW WILL THESE SOCIAL CHANGES AFFECT OUR SCHOOLS? WHAT MUST WE DO NOW TO COPE WITH THE CURRENT STATE OF DECLINE? WHAT SHOULD WE DO TO SEE US THROUGH THIS DECADE AND THROUGH TO THE YEAR 2000?

PLANNING VS. THE QUICK FIX

THE TEMPTATION IS TO GO FOR THE "QUICK FIXES" THAT WILL SEE US THROUGH STILL ANOTHER BUDGET. AND WHILE THESE "QUICK FIXES" ARE DESIGNED TO APPEASE OUR VARIOUS PUBLICS--STUDENTS, PARENTS AND EMPLOYEES ON THE ONE HAND; SENIOR CITIZENS, NON-PARENT TAXPAYERS AND BUSINESS, COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL INTERESTS ON THE OTHER HAND--THE QUICK FIXES SELDOM MAKE ANYONE HAPPY AND GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IS ENGAGED IN PATCHWORK ECONOMICS.

THE MORE DIFFICULT BUT INFINITELY MORE SENSIBLE APPROACH IS TO DEVELOP A LONG-RANGE PLAN THAT NOT ONLY CONSIDERS THE PRESENT STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS BUT ATTEMPTS TO PROJECT TEN YEARS HENCE. THIS LONG-RANGE PLAN CAN BE AS COMPREHENSIVE AS THE BOARD AND THE ADMINISTRATION DEEM NECESSARY. BUT IT WOULD SEEM THAT ANY LONG-RANGE PLAN SHOULD INCLUDE THESE BASIC ELEMENTS:

1. OVERRIDING PHILOSOPHY OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT MUST BE AGREED UPON EARLY SINCE THIS BECOMES THE FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE PLANNING.

2. NEW INITIATIVES IN PROGRAMS SHOULD CERTAINLY REFLECT THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES OCCURRING IN THE COMMUNITY AND THE CHANGING MORES OF THE COMMUNITY--IF INDEED THEY ARE CHANGING.

3. ENROLLMENT PROJECTIONS OVER THE NEXT TEN YEARS

4. FINANCIAL PROJECTIONS THAT MIGHT INCLUDE A FUTURE SCENARIO OF WHAT STATE AID MIGHT BE LIKE IN THE YEARS AHEAD; WHAT LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES MIGHT BE EXPECTED OR INITIATED TO IMPROVE OUR PRESENT STATUS; WHAT THE IMPACT OF CERTAIN COURT DECISIONS WILL HAVE ON FUTURE EXPENDITURES AND/OR FUNDING SOURCES; WHAT OUR COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS MIGHT COST US; HOW CHANGING COMMUNITY MORES MIGHT AFFECT OUR PROGRAMMATIC OFFERINGS; AND MORE.

5. ANTICIPATED STAFFING LEVELS SHOULD REFLECT ALL OF THE AFOREMENTIONED FACTORS.

THE NEED FOR INVOLVEMENT

I AM NOT SUGGESTING THAT PLANS BE DEVELOPED BY THE BOARD AND THE ADMINISTRATION IN ISOLATION FROM OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY. ON THE CONTRARY, SUCH AN APPROACH WOULD SELF-DESTRUCT!

CALL IT THE POST-WATERGATE SYNDROME OR WHATEVER, THE FACT IS THAT WE CAN NO LONGER PLAN FOR PEOPLE; WE MUST PLAN WITH PEOPLE. IF ANY PLAN IS TO HAVE THE COMMITMENT OF ALL OF THE PLAYERS IN THE DRAMA; IF ANY RECOMMENDATION IS TO CARRY CREDIBILITY AND VALIDITY--THEN REPRESENTATIVES OF EVERY SEGMENT OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY MUST BE INVOLVED IN THE STUDY, THE ANALYSIS OF DATA AND IN THE CHARTING OF FUTURE COURSES OF ACTION. UNLESS THE PLAN CARRIES THE IMPRIMATUR OF OUR CLIENTS, OUR TAXPAYERS AND OTHER MEMBERS OF OUR VARIOUS PUBLICS--IT IS DOOMED TO FAILURE.

I AM NOT SUGGESTING AN ABDICATION OF DECISION-MAKING POWERS THAT REST MAINLY WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT AND THE BOARD.

I AM CERTAINLY NOT SUGGESTING ADMINISTRATION BY REFERENDUM EITHER. I AM SUGGESTING THAT OUR VARIOUS PUBLICS BE GIVEN THE PRIVILEGE --IF NOT THE RIGHT--TO INFLUENCE THE DECISIONS FOR WHICH WE ARE ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE.

A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS? YES! UNWIELDY AND CUMBERSOME? YES! BE REMINDED, HOWEVER, OF THE NUMBER OF TIMES THE SEVEREST CRITIC HAS BEEN CONVERTED TO THE STAUNCHEST SUPPORTER WHEN INVOLVED IN SEEKING SOLUTIONS TO OUR MANY AND COMPLEX PROBLEMS.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

AS WE BEGIN TO PLAN FOR THE HERE AND NOW AND FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS OF CHILDREN--OUR VARIOUS AD HOC COMMITTEES, TASK FORCES, STUDY GROUPS, ADVISORY GROUPS AND ALL THE REST--ALL THOSE INTERESTED IN THE CONTINUED NOURISHMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION MUST TAKE HEED OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES OCCURRING IN OUR NATION, OUR STATE, OUR REGIONS AND OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES. A STUDY OF THESE CHANGES WILL CLEARLY INDICATE THAT MANAGING DECLINE WILL REQUIRE A TWO-PRONG THRUST ON OUR PART.

FIRST, WE MUST DEMONSTRATE OUR WILLINGNESS TO PARE BACK EXPENDITURES TO MORE CLOSELY REFLECT ENROLLMENT DECLINES. YOU AND I KNOW THAT REDUCTIONS IN COSTS CANNOT BE PROPORTIONATE TO THE DECLINE IN ENROLLMENT--GIVEN THE RAVAGES OF INFLATION, THE NEED FOR NEW PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, THE DEMANDS OF NEW AGE GROUPS, THE RISING COST OF ENERGY AND OTHER OPERATIONAL NEEDS, THE UNCONTROLLABILITY OF CERTAIN FIXED COSTS AND THE LIKE. ALL THIS AS REVENUES, THAT HINGE ON ENROLLMENTS, CONTINUE TO DROP. BUT EVERY ATTEMPT MUST BE MADE TO MOVE FROM INCREMENTAL BUDGETS TO TRADE-OFF BUDGETS IF WE ARE TO MAINTAIN SOME BASE OF SUPPORT IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

SECONDLY, WE MUST TRY TO WIN BACK CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT WHICH IS ITS COMPANION. A KEY GROUP HERE IS THE EVER-GROWING NUMBER OF SENIOR CITIZENS. FOR THOSE WHO ARE IN THE TWILIGHT OF THEIR LIVES...ALL OF WHOM FEEL THE DAILY STING OF INFLATION...MANY OF WHOM ARE ON FIXED INCOMES...AND SOME OF WHOM HAVE HAD NO CONTACT WITH PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN YEARS...UNLIMITED FINANCIAL

SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IS A DRAIN AND A HARDSHIP THEY CAN NO LONGER ENDURE.

THIS GROUP IS NOT ONLY KEY BECAUSE OF THE SACRIFICES THEY ARE ASKED TO MAKE BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF THE NUMBER OF VOTES THEY WILL HAVE IN THE FUTURE. BY THE YEAR 1990, IT IS ESTIMATED THAT THE NUMBER OF PERSONS AGE 55 OR OVER WILL EXCEED THE NUMBER OF PERSONS IN OUR SCHOOL-AGE POPULATION. THIS WOULD BE A "DEMOGRAPHIC FIRST" IF THE ESTIMATES MATERIALIZE.

BUT THE GROWING LACK OF CONFIDENCE AND DIMINISHING LEVEL OF SUPPORT DO NOT END WITH SENIOR CITIZENS. DISENCHANTMENT HAS INFILTRATED THE RANKS OF EMPLOYERS, NON-PARENT TAXPAYERS AND EVEN SOME PARENTS AS WELL. RECENT PROPOSALS THAT WOULD INSTITUTE TUITION TAX CREDIT PLANS AND/OR VOUCHER SYSTEMS REFLECT THIS TREND ALL TOO DRAMATICALLY.

THE CHALLENGE

DURING THIS ENTIRE DECADE, WE WILL BE CHALLENGED TO DEVELOP PLANS THAT TAKE COGNIZANCE OF THESE CHANGES IN THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF OUR COMMUNITIES. LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES WILL BE NEEDED TO INSTITUTE TAX REFORMS THAT WILL PROVIDE GREATER RELIEF FOR OUR SENIOR CITIZENS AND YET PRODUCE REVENUES IN THE AMOUNTS NECESSARY FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING. LIAISON WITH LEGISLATORS WILL BE NEEDED TO DRAMATIZE THE FALLACIES--IF NOT THE EVILS--OF TUITION TAX CREDITS AND VOUCHERS; TO SEEK ADMENDMENTS TO EXISTING LEGISLATION THAT DRAINS MORE AND MORE DOLLARS ANNUALLY FROM INSTRUCTIONAL BUDGETS AND CHANNELS THEM INTO

THE FUNDING OF TRANSPORTATION AND OTHER ANCILLARY SERVICES; TO MAKE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING LESS DESTRUCTIVE TO THE IMAGE OF PUBLIC EDUCATORS.

AND WHAT OF THE CHANGES IN SOCIAL VALUES AND STANDARDS? WITH MORE SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES AND MORE FAMILIES WITH TWO WORKING PARENTS--WILL THERE NOT BE A NEED FOR EXPANDED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE FUTURE? SHOULD WE NOT CONSIDER OFFERING PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS ON A TUITION BASIS? WOULD NOT THESE OFFERINGS ATTRACT MORE CLIENTS TO SCHOOLS WHERE SPACE IS NOW AVAILABLE WITHOUT BLEEDING THE TAXPAYER EVEN MORE? WOULD THIS INITIATIVE SERVE AS AN ANTIDOTE TO THE CURRENT EXODUS TO NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

WITH A BABY BOOMLET IN THE OFFING, SHOULD WE GIVE CONTEMPLATED SCHOOL CLOSINGS ANOTHER CLOSE LOOK? RATHER THAN SELL THESE BUILDINGS OUTRIGHT, IS IT A WISER COURSE OF ACTION FOR YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT--BASED ON PROJECTIONS THROUGH THE YEAR 2000--TO RENT CERTAIN BUILDINGS OR CONVERT THEM TO OTHER USES STILL RETAINING TITLE?

SOME APPROACHES TO MANAGING DECLINE

IT IS AGAINST THIS BACKDROP OF CHANGES IN THE DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF OUR RESPECTIVE COMMUNITIES THAT WE MUST ATTEMPT TO MANAGE THE PRESENT STATE OF DECLINE. OUR TIME CONSTRAINTS TODAY WILL NOT PERMIT A DETAILED DISCUSSION OF SPECIFIC SAVING TECHNIQUES AND I AM NOT SURE THAT I COULD ADD ANYTHING TO YOUR REPERTOIRE. I WOULD PRESENT FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION, HOWEVER, CERTAIN APPROACHES TO MORE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT.

1. THE CONSORTIUM APPROACH

WE ALL AGREE THAT THERE ARE EVILS IN EXCESSIVE SIZE. LARGE SCHOOL DISTRICTS TEND TO DEPERSONALIZE THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION. BUT WHEN STUDENTS AND STAFF MEMBERS ARE CONGREGATED IN REASONABLE, MANAGEABLE NUMBERS--CERTAIN BENEFITS CAN BE ACHIEVED. CERTAINLY THE OPERATION CAN BECOME MORE EFFICIENT--HOPEFULLY WITHOUT SACRIFICING EFFECTIVENESS.

AS OUR SCHOOL DISTRICTS CONTINUE TO SHRINK EACH YEAR...IN TERMS OF STUDENT ENROLLMENT, TOTAL STAFF AVAILABLE, NUMBER OF BUILDINGS AVAILABLE AND SO ON...IT BEHOOVES US TO SEEK WAYS TO ELIMINATE THE DUPLICATION OF NEEDED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT OCCURS FROM DISTRICT TO DISTRICT.

SOME YEARS AGO, INTERMEDIATE UNITS WERE ORGANIZED FOR JUST THAT PURPOSE. IT WAS THOUGHT THAT I.U.'S COULD PROVIDE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR THOSE DISTRICTS (PARTICULARLY THE SMALLER ONES) THAT LACK THE ORGANIZATION, THE PERSONNEL AND THE FACILITIES TO PRODUCE QUALITY EDUCATION. AND OUR I.U.'S HAVE SERVED AS A SPLENDID SUPPORT ARM DURING THE YEARS OF THEIR EXISTENCE!

BUT AS LEGISLATORS AT EVERY LEVEL CONTINUE TO BROADEN THE SCOPE OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THROUGH MANDATES; AS JUDGES CONTINUE TO PRESCRIBE DUE PROCESS AND LEGISLATE CURE-ALLS FOR SCHOOL PROBLEMS; AS

PARENTS MAINTAIN HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR PROGRAMS OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY; AS STAFF MEMBERS PRESS FOR JOB SECURITY WITH HIGHER WAGES AND INCREASED BENEFITS...SMALLER SCHOOL DISTRICTS WILL STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE FINANCIALLY.

I WOULD SUGGEST THAT THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF AN I.U. OR OF A GIVEN GEOGRAPHICAL REGION MUST BEGIN TO COORDINATE...MORE EFFECTIVELY, MORE SYSTEMATICALLY AND IN A MORE FORMAL MANNER...THE EVER-GROWING RANGE OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES EXPECTED OF US IF THEY ARE TO SURVIVE THE ERA OF DECLINE AND RETRENCHMENT.

A RECENT POLL OF THE FIFTEEN (15) SUPERINTENDENTS WHO COMPRISE THE CHIEF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS OF I.U. #25 ELICITED OVER A DOZEN AREAS WHERE IMPROVED COORDINATION OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES MIGHT LEAD TO MORE EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT AND REDUCED COSTS TO THE TAXPAYERS.

WE ARE NOW IN THE PROCESS OF FORMING CONSORTIA OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS WHO WILL POOL THEIR LIMITED RESOURCES TO IMPROVE THEIR DELIVERY OF:

... IN-SERVICE PROGRAMS
... DATA PROCESSING
... ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS
... TRANSPORTATION SERVICES
... RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
... PURCHASING
... SPECIAL EDUCATION
... AND MORE

ON OCCASION, THE CONSORTIUM MIGHT CONSIST OF THREE OR FOUR DISTRICTS; FOR OTHER PURPOSES, A CONSORTIUM OF SEVEN OR EIGHT DISTRICTS

MAY BE MORE APPROPRIATE; WHILE ON OTHER OCCASIONS, ALL FIFTEEN DISTRICTS MAY CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE IN A GIVEN PROJECT.

WE HAVE LEARNED THAT THE KEY TO THE SUCCESSFUL COORDINATION OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES RESTS ON THE FOUNDATION OF A "COMMON CALENDAR" ...A CONSENSUS CALENDAR...DEVELOPED BY THE COUNCIL OF CHIEF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS...ADOPTED BY THEIR RESPECTIVE BOARDS. WITH SCHOOLS OF THE I.U. OPEN ON THE SAME DAYS AND CLOSED ON THE SAME DAYS...OUR ABILITY TO COORDINATE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES IS ENHANCED CONSIDERABLY.

PRESENTLY, WE HAVE A COMMON CALENDAR WHICH DICTATES THE SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE I.U. HOPEFULLY, ONE DAY THIS COMMON CALENDAR WILL BE USED AS LEVERAGE...THROUGH LEGISLATION...IN DICTATING THE "WHEN" OF SERVICES TO NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS AS WELL. RECENTLY SPONSORED LEGISLATION THAT IN ESSENCE LIMITED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES TO NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS BASED ON THE COMMON CALENDAR ADOPTED BY THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF AN I.U. FAILED BY ONLY A WHISKER. THINK OF THE COSTS EACH OF US INCURS IN PROVIDING SERVICES TO NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS ON THE DAYS WE ARE SHUT DOWN.

OUR COMMON CALENDAR NOT ONLY ADDRESSES THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH COORDINATION AND NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL COSTS BUT ATTEMPTS TO REDUCE ENERGY COSTS AS WELL. BUILT INTO THE COMMON CALENDAR ARE EXTENDED RECESSES AND WEEK-ENDS DURING THE COLD OF WINTER AND SHORTENED RECESSES WHEN THE DEMANDS ON HEAT AND LIGHT ARE LESSENED. THE ENERGY FEATURES OF OUR COMMON CALENDAR ARE NOT POPULAR WITH STUDENTS,

PARENTS AND STAFF MEMBERS WHO ARE ACCUSTOMED TO LONG SPRING RECESSES. BUT THEY BEGRUDGINGLY CONCEDE THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMON CALENDAR REPRESENTS A LEGITIMATE EFFORT TO ECONOMIZE.

MAJOR TARGETS OF OUR EFFORTS AT COORDINATION ARE THE FIELDS OF CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS AND LABOR RELATIONS GENERALLY. CAN YOU IMAGINE HOW MUCH BETTER OUR INDIVIDUAL CONTRACTS WOULD BE TODAY IF WE HAD MOBILIZED OUR MEAGER EXPERTISE AND RESOURCES IN THE FIELD OF LABOR RELATIONS BACK IN THE LATE SIXTIES? CAN YOU IMAGINE HOW EFFECTIVE...EVEN NOW...THE AMALGAMATION OF THREE OR FOUR CONTIGUOUS SCHOOL DISTRICTS WOULD BE FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS?

NO SESSION AT THE BARGAINING TABLE EVER ENDS WITHOUT A REMINDER OF WHAT OTHER DISTRICTS HAVE DONE FOR THEIR EMPLOYEES IN SALARIES, FRINGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS. AND WHILE COMPARATIVE DATA ARE AVAILABLE, THESE DATA ARE OFTEN DIFFICULT TO INTERPRET AND NOT ALWAYS CURRENT.

THROW IN THE EXPERTISE AND RESOURCES PROVIDED BY THE PARENT ORGANIZATION, THE STATE-WIDE GAME PLAN WHICH IS PROPAGATED BY THE PARENT ORGANIZATION, THE STRICTURES OF ACT 195 AND THE VARIOUS OTHER ADVANTAGES GAINED BY THE "OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE"...AND OUR POSITIONS BECOME ALMOST UNTENABLE. BUT A SKILLED NEGOTIATOR...EMPLOYED BY THREE OR FOUR OR MORE SCHOOL DISTRICTS...PAID ON A PRORATED BASIS PERHAPS...IN CONSTANT COMMUNICATION WITH EACH OF THE PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS...AND PERHAPS THE BALL GAME CHANGES. FOOD FOR THOUGHT!

FACE IT! THERE IS LITTLE THAT WE CAN DO TO CHANGE EXISTING LEGISLATION THAT THROTTLES OUR EFFORTS TO ECONOMIZE OR TO OPERATE EFFICIENTLY. ACT 195 IS HERE TO STAY AS IS ACT 372 AND SO MANY OTHER PIECES OF LEGISLATION THAT HAVE SENT SCHOOL BUDGETS SOARING. WHILE WE HAVE LITTLE OR NO CHANCE TO REPEAL CERTAIN LAWS AND RESTRICTIVE MANDATES, WE CAN CONCENTRATE ON REVISING SAID LEGISLATION TO MAKE COMPLIANCE MORE PALATABLE.

AGAIN, ONE OF THE AREAS TARGETED FOR MORE EFFECTIVE COORDINATION IS THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS. TOO OFTEN WE MONITOR AND REACT TO LEGISLATION ALREADY PROPOSED BY VESTED INTEREST GROUPS. TOO OFTEN OUR RESISTANCE TO COSTLY, DAMAGING LEGISLATION COMES TOO LITTLE AND TOO LATE AND PUBLIC EDUCATION SUFFERS ACCORDINGLY.

NOW IS THE TIME FOR CONCERTED ACTION BY LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS ...THROUGH THEIR CITIZENRY...TO INTRODUCE LEGISLATION BENEFICIAL TO THE SUSTENANCE AND GROWTH OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF THE STATE. THERE ARE LEGISLATORS WHO WOULD HELP US. THEY AWAIT OUR INITIATIVE BUT NOT NECESSARILY THROUGH STATE ORGANIZATIONS. GRASS ROOTS ACTION IS WHAT THEY SEEK AND WHAT THEY RESPECT.

2. STAFFING

DURING A TIME OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT THE SCHOOL DISTRICT PLAN AHEAD IN ITS USE OF STAFF SO THAT NO PERMANENT TEACHERS WILL BE HIRED WHO MUST BE FIRED WITHIN A FEW YEARS. THIS SAME SENSE OF JOB SECURITY SHOULD PREVAIL AMONG THE OTHER JOB CATEGORIES AS WELL.

A GOOD PLAN WILL LOOK TEN YEARS DOWN THE ROAD. IT WILL ASSESS THE NEEDS FOR TEACHING STAFF BASED UPON CAREFULLY MADE AND FREQUENTLY UPDATED ENROLLMENT ESTIMATES. THESE ESTIMATES SHOULD BE TRANSLATED INTO AVAILABLE JOB SLOTS.

A GOOD STAFFING PLAN SHOULD ALSO ATTEMPT TO ESTIMATE THE CHANGES WHICH MIGHT OCCUR IN THE PRESENT STAFF OVER TIME. STAFFING FORECASTS SHOULD CONSIDER THE EXPERIENTIAL LEVEL OF CURRENT STAFF; ANTICIPATED RETIREMENTS; THE HISTORY OF ATTRITION THROUGH DEATHS, RESIGNATIONS AND OTHER SEPARATIONS FROM SERVICE; AND OTHER FACTORS UNIQUE TO A PARTICULAR SCHOOL DISTRICT.

IN AN ERA OF DECLINE, EVERY ATTEMPT SHOULD BE MADE TO PROVIDE MORE FLEXIBLE STAFFING PATTERNS AND TO REDUCE SALARY COSTS. GREATER STAFFING FLEXIBILITY MAY BE ACHIEVED BY HIRING TEACHERS WITH BROADER CERTIFICATION, VARIED INTEREST AND SPECIAL TALENTS. TEACHERS WITH DUAL CERTIFICATION MIGHT BE ASSIGNED TO TWO DISCIPLINES THEREBY MAXIMIZING THEIR UTILIZATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL TIME.

GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN STAFFING MAY ALSO BE ACHIEVED BY CHANNELING STAFF MEMBERS INTO IN-SERVICE PROGRAMS THAT WOULD DEVELOP AREAS OF CERTIFICATION NEVER USED OR SELDOM USED. SINCE MANY SCHOOL DISTRICTS SUBSIDIZE ADVANCED TRAINING TO SOME DEGREE, CONTROL OVER THE USE OF THESE FUNDS MIGHT HINGE ON CAVEATS THAT WILL PRODUCE A MORE VERSATILE STAFF.

TEACHER SALARY SCHEDULES WHICH ARE PREDICATED MAINLY ON YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AND THE AMOUNT OF FORMAL TRAINING ACQUIRED DO NOT ALWAYS ENSURE QUALITY PERFORMANCE. YET, BY LAW, SCHOOL DISTRICTS MUST USE THE RULE OF REVERSE SENIORITY WHEN REDUCING STAFF AND OFTEN BRIGHT, ENTHUSIASTIC, GOOD PERFORMING TEACHERS MUST BE FURLOUGHED WHILE THE MORE MARGINAL TEACHERS REMAIN.

GIVEN THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE CODE, STAFF TURNOVER CAN BE ENCOURAGED THROUGH VOLUNTARY EARLY RETIREMENT INCENTIVE PLANS WHICH PROVIDE EMPLOYEES THE OPTION OF LEAVING WITH DIGNITY AND WITH SOME FINANCIAL INDUCEMENT.

SPECIAL INCENTIVES MIGHT BE PROVIDED TEACHERS OF HIGHLY SPECIALIZED SUBJECTS WHO ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY. RECOGNIZING THAT MERIT PAY IS TABOO AND THAT TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS GUARD THEIR SINGLE SALARY SCHEDULES, WE MAY CHOOSE TO OFFER SUMMER "IN-SERVICE" FOR TEACHERS OF MATH OR SCIENCE, FOR EXAMPLE. THE EXTRA PAY MIGHT BE THE DIFFERENCE IN ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TEACHERS WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE GRAVITATE TO BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY.

GREATER LATITUDE CAN BE EXERCISED IN FILLING NON-TEACHING STAFFING NEEDS. WHERE ENROLLMENTS ARE DROPPING AND THE SYSTEM ANTICIPATES CLOSING SCHOOLS, ONE METHOD OF MAINTAINING JOB SECURITY FOR PRESENT EMPLOYEES WOULD BE TO DEVELOP TEMPORARY AND ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF PROVIDING THE SERVICE SUCH AS CONTRACTED SERVICES WITH OUTSIDE AGENCIES. BY BUYING TIME, CURRENT STAFF COULD BE CONCENTRATED IN EXISTING FACILITIES. WHEN AND IF SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED, CONTRACTS FOR SERVICES MAY NOT BE RENEWED.

3. TUITION CHARGES OR SPECIAL FEES

THE SHIBBOLETH "BACK TO BASICS" IS SHOUTED BY IRATE TAXPAYERS EACH YEAR AS THE BUDGET CYCLE COMMENCES. MANY OF US RECOGNIZE THIS BATTLE CRY AS A EUPHEMISM FOR "CUT THE BUDGET."

ON THE OTHER HAND, MANY PARENTS AND STUDENTS CONTINUE TO PRESS FOR COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES. SOME SCHOOL DISTRICTS HAVE APPROACHED THIS DILEMMA BY CHARGING FEES OR TUITION RATES FOR CERTAIN PROGRAMS AND SERVICES WHICH ARE NOT BASIC TO THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM. DAY CARE, PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS, SUMMER SCHOOL, DRIVER EDUCATION AND A VARIETY OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMS HAVE BEEN SPECIAL TARGETS IN A MOVE TO MAKE CERTAIN PROGRAMS COMPLETELY SELF-SUSTAINING OR A MINIMAL DRAIN ON THE TAXPAYERS. FOOD SERVICES IS A LINE ITEM THAT IS NOT FUNDED AT ALL BY SOME SCHOOL DISTRICTS WHO PASS THE HIGHER COST ON TO THE CONSUMERS--I.E., THE STUDENTS AND FACULTY WHO CHOOSE TO USE THE SERVICE.

OTHER SCHOOL DISTRICTS VIEW THE LEVYING OF FEES AND CHARGES AS ANATHEMA TO THE PROCESS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AND REFUSE TO OFFER PROGRAMS THEY CANNOT FUND ENTIRELY. STILL OTHERS LEVY THE CHARGES BUT MAKE PROVISIONS FOR STUDENTS WHO CANNOT AFFORD TO PAY. THIS DECISION OBVIOUSLY RESTS WITH EACH LOCAL DISTRICT. THE DISTRICT'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SPECIAL FEES AND CHARGES SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE AFOREMENTIONED STATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY WHICH IS INTEGRAL TO THE LONG-RANGE PLAN.

4. SCHOOL CLOSINGS AND GRADE REORGANIZATION

MOST OF US CAN REMEMBER HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS TO GENERATE SUPPORT FOR NEW SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION--EVEN WHEN BULGING STUDENT POPULATIONS MADE THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL SPACE SO REAL. DURING THIS PERIOD OF ENROLLMENT DECLINE, WE ARE LEARNING THAT THE CLOSING OF UNNEEDED SCHOOL BUILDINGS CAN GENERATE AN EQUAL AMOUNT OF HEATED DEBATE.

I WOULD CONJECTURE, HOWEVER, THAT THE STRENUOUS OPPOSITION ENCOUNTERED BY SOME SCHOOL DISTRICTS IS DUE TO THE FAULTY PROCESS USED IN DESIGNATING CERTAIN SCHOOLS FOR CLOSING. TRUE, MANY SCHOOL DISTRICTS LACK THE TRAINED, EXPERIENCED PERSONNEL WHO CAN DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM. BUT A PROCESS THAT INCLUDES SOME OR ALL OF THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURES WILL GO FAR TOWARD DEFUSING OR MINIMIZING OPPOSITION TO SCHOOL CLOSINGS.

1. ALLOW SUFFICIENT LEAD TIME

WHEN THE DEVELOPING ENROLLMENT TRENDS SIGNAL A SIGNIFICANT DROP IN ENROLLMENT THROUGH THE BALANCE OF THIS CENTURY, IT IS TIME TO MOBILIZE A SCHOOL FACILITIES TASK FORCE (OR CALL IT WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE). EVERY SEGMENT OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY SHOULD BE REPRESENTED ON THE TASK FORCE AND SHOULD ELECT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE NUMBER DESIGNATED BY THE SUPERINTENDENT WITH BOARD CONCURRENCE. THE TASK FORCE WOULD BE APPRISED OF ITS AD HOC STATUS AND REMINDED THAT THE FINAL DECISION ON SCHOOL CLOSINGS RESTS WITH THE SUPERINTENDENT AND THE BOARD.

FROM THE OUTSET, ALL AVAILABLE DATA SHOULD BE SHARED WITH THE TASK FORCE. IF THE NEED IS FELT, OUTSIDE CONSULTANTS OR RESOURCE PERSONS MIGHT BE BROUGHT IN TO AMPLIFY THE DATA OR ASSIST IN THE INTERPRETATION OF DATA.

THE TASK FORCE MUST BE REMINDED CONSTANTLY THAT RECOMMENDED SCHOOL CLOSINGS MUST BE ANNOUNCED AT LEAST ONE YEAR PRIOR TO THE ANTICIPATED CLOSING AND THEIR TIMETABLE MUST REFLECT THIS CONSTRAINT. THE ONE YEAR LEAD TIME IS REQUIRED TO AIR THE RECOMMENDATIONS PUBLICLY AND TO ELICIT FEEDBACK. THE YEAR MAY ALSO BE NEEDED TO ORIENT STUDENT, PARENTS AND STAFF; TO RETRAIN STAFF; AND TO FINALIZE ARRANGEMENTS GENERALLY.

2. ESTABLISH THE REASON(S) FOR SCHOOL CLOSINGS

IS THE REASON RELATED SOLEY TO UNNEEDED SPACE BECAUSE OF ENROLLMENT DECLINE: IS THE CLOSING DUE TO THE ANTIQUATED NATURE OF THE BUILDING WHICH MAKES INSTRUCTION DIFFICULT? IS THE SUGGESTED CLOSING PART OF A MASTER PLAN TO PHASE OUT LESS ENERGY EFFICIENT BUILDINGS? IS THE RECOMMENDED CLOSING PREDICATED ON ALL OF THESE REASONS AND MORE?

WHATEVER THE REASONS, THESE SHOULD BE CLEARLY ENUNCIATED BY THE TASK FORCE

3. FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN CLOSING SCHOOLS

THE JOURNALS ARE REPLETE WITH ARTICLES THAT ENUMERATE THE MANY CONSIDERATIONS THAT MIGHT APPLY TO SCHOOL CLOSINGS. HERE ARE BUT A FEW:

a. PRESENT AND PROJECTED ENROLLMENTS BY SCHOOL BUILDING
b. AGE, EFFICIENCY QUOTIENT AND INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF EACH BUILDING
c. COST OF OPERATING EACH BUILDING
d. ANTICIPATED RELOCATION OF STUDENTS
e. ADDITIONAL TRANSPORTATION COSTS INVOLVED IN REDISTRICTING
f. SALABILITY OR RENTABILITY OF THE PROPERTIES IN QUESTION

THE NUMBER OF FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED WILL VARY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PROBLEM. NO MATTER THE NUMBER OF FACTORS, THE IMPRESSION MUST BE CONVEYED THAT THE RECOMMENDED CLOSING OF ANY SCHOOL IS BASED UPON HARD DATA AND OBJECTIVE JUDGMENT--NOT POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY!

4. RELATING SCHOOL CLOSINGS TO THE LONG-RANGE PLAN FOR MANAGING DECLINE

THE REASONS FOR CLOSING CERTAIN SCHOOLS OVER OTHERS SHOULD CORRELATE HIGHLY WITH THE PREVIOUSLY DEVELOPED ELEMENTS OF THE LONG-RANGE PLAN--ESPECIALLY WITH THE ADOPTED SCHOOL DISTRICT PHILOSOPHY AND THE NEW INITIATIVES WHICH ARE ON THE DRAWING BOARD. WITH THIS IN MIND, A WEIGHTING SCHEME MIGHT BE DEVELOPED FOR THE FACTORS UNDER CONSIDERATION. AGAIN, THE LONG-RANGE PLAN WOULD PROVIDE THE BASIS FOR WEIGHTING.

5. PRIORITIZING SCHOOL CLOSINGS

BASED ON THE FACTORS UTILIZED AND THE WEIGHTS ASSIGNED TO EACH FACTOR, EACH SCHOOL MIGHT BE ASSIGNED A RATING BY THE TASK FORCE. THESE RATINGS MIGHT THEN BE TRANSLATED INTO A RANKING SYSTEM.

6. ARTICULATING THE NEED TO CLOSE SCHOOLS

ONLY AFTER THE TASK FORCE HAS COMPLETED, REVIEWED, ANALYZED AND INTERPRETED ALL AVAILABLE DATA CAN A PROFILE OF EACH SCHOOL BE DEVELOPED. ONLY AFTER EXTENSIVE PUBLIC REVIEW OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS FORWARDED BY THE TASK FORCE CAN THE SUPERINTENDENT AND THE BOARD MAKE DECISIONS THAT--WHILE NOT ALWAYS POPULAR--WILL AT LEAST BE TERMED OBJECTIVE.

7. POSSIBLE GRADE REORGANIZATION

SCHOOL CLOSINGS OFTEN TRIGGER GRADE REORGANIZATION WITH THE DISTRICT. HOPEFULLY, ANY REORGANIZATION WILL BE BASED MAINLY ON EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND WILL NOT RESULT IN EXPEDIENCIES THAT IMPAIR CHILD GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT--I.E., SIX-YEAR HIGH SCHOOLS AND THE LIKE.

SIGNIFICANT GRADE REORGANIZATIONS MAY REQUIRE RETRAINING OF STAFF TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF NEW AGE GROUPINGS; TO RENOVATE REMAINING FACILITIES TO REFLECT NEW PROGRAMMATIC OFFERINGS; TO PROPERLY GEAR THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY TO THE IMPENDING CHANGES.

SUMMARY

TIME WILL NOT PERMIT DISCUSSION OF THE MORE SPECIFIC AREAS OF OUR SCHOOL OPERATIONS THAT WILL COME UNDER TIGHT SCRUTINY DURING THIS ERA OF DECLINE. REST ASSURED, HOWEVER, THAT DOLLARS CAN BE SAVED BY:

1. MONITORING MORE CLOSELY THE ABUSE OF STAFF ABSENTEEISM
2. INVOKING ENERGY CONSERVATION TECHNIQUES
3. SEEKING PRIVATE FUNDING SOURCES FOR CERTAIN PROGRAMS AND SERVICES
4. PROVIDING REWARD SYSTEMS AND OTHER INCENTIVES
5. PROMOTING LEGISLATION THAT WOULD SOFTEN--IF NOT ELIMINATE--THE FINANCIAL BURDEN OF CERTAIN MANDATES
6. UTILIZING EXISTING TECHNOLOGY MORE CONSISTENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY
7. INVOKING NEW MEASURES OF ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH MORE EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL
8. CONTRACTING CERTAIN SERVICES
9. AND ON, AND ON

COMMUNICATIONS

PERHAPS THE POOR IMAGE WE PROJECT AS MANAGERS CAN BE TRACED TO THE INADEQUATE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS WE EMPLOY WITH OUR VARIOUS PUBLICS. PEOPLE SEEMINGLY LACK THE INFORMATION, THE DATA, THE FUTURE SCENARIOS IN THE FORM OF LONG-RANGE PLANNING.

THERE IS A CONSTANT NEED TO ESTABLISH A MULTI-CHANNEL/MULTI-MEDIA, EXTERNAL/INTERNAL, TWO-WAY COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM WHICH NOT ONLY INFORMS PEOPLE BUT ELICITS RESPONSES FROM THEM AS WELL. IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO PRINT FANCY BROCHURES, HOLD PRESS CONFERENCES, HIT THE LECTURE

CIRCUIT AND APPEAR ON TALK SHOWS. AN EQUAL AMOUNT OF TIME AND EFFORT SHOULD GO INTO LISTENING--LISTENING TO WHAT OUR VARIOUS PUBLICS HAVE TO SAY.

IF YOU SUBSCRIBE TO THE NOTION THAT WE SHOULD NO LONGER PLAN FOR PEOPLE BUT WITH THEM INSTEAD; IF YOU TRULY BELIEVE THAT SHARED DECISION-MAKING CAN WIN SUPPORT WHERE THERE IS APATHY OR RESISTANCE... THEN IT FOLLOWS THAT YOU WILL ACCEPT THE CRITICAL NEED FOR TWO-WAY, OPEN AND HONEST COMMUNICATIONS INVOLVING OUR MANY PUBLICS.

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